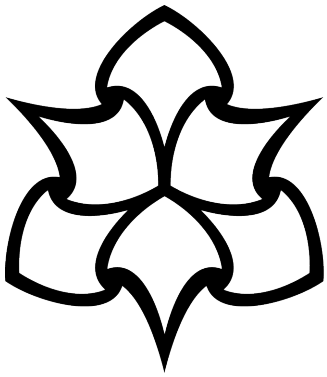

PRISM
Casting New Light on Learning, Theory and Practice

'Risky Business?'
On perceptions of risk and vulnerability in Further Education

Abstract

Since incorporation, the economic value of students to colleges has meant that the language of 'risk' and 'drop-out' has permeated the further education sector, placing retention and achievement high up on the agenda, with what appears to be little consideration for the consequences this might have for the students the terms are used to describe. This study provides a detailed exploration of the conflicting accounts of the term 'risk' from the perspectives of tutors, support staff and managers within a further education college, and what the implications of this are for their practice with learners who are identified as 'at risk'. The findings suggest that perceived risk is strongly associated with behaviours which make the student 'vulnerable', which could adversely affect students from so-called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. Thus, this paper makes the case that the notion of risk could disproportionately impact upon students who are marginalised for a variety of reasons. This could lead to practices which actively exclude students who are perceived to be 'vulnerable', and therefore of less value to an institution operating within a neoliberal marketplace.

Keywords: *risk; vulnerability; social inclusion; further education; neoliberalism; performativity*

1. Introduction

Further education policy, as in many other parts of the education sector, is littered with the language of 'standards', 'rigour', 'excellence', 'performance', 'targets' and 'accountability'. As a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, in which further education providers were incorporated into a centralised funding system, competition for market-share has become a key driver of institutional practice. As colleges have become increasingly more 'business-like', students have come to represent units of value. Those who are of lower value (less likely to complete their chosen course) are a financial risk. As such, this paper posits that 'risk' represents an ethical dilemma for educators who are simultaneously expected to balance their success rates with their duty to promote social and cultural inclusion (Lippke, 2012). This paper will outline research findings which investigated the language of 'risk', retention and 'drop-out' in a General Further Education College in the North of England. It will argue that high-stakes teaching environments and performance-based education policy has created a conflict of professional identity, whilst students who constitute their definition of risk are simultaneously the subject of both their concern and the

source of blame for their 'at risk' status. This paper will go on to demonstrate that performance-based accountability practices fuel individualism and 'self-responsibility', leading, in some cases, to risk-averse practices and the othering of those who are perceived to be 'vulnerable'.

2. The neoliberal environment: Performativity, competitive individualism and risk

The relentless pace of public education policy since 1992 has created unprecedented instability in the sector. The prevalence of free-market practices that the further education and skills sector has been subjected to over the last thirty years has seen services which were traditionally the preserve of locally-accountable authorities, being gradually co-opted to serve a different purpose. This new purpose, influenced by what Harvey (2005) refers to as the 'neoliberal project' is one in which the freedom of the market is paramount. This changing set of policies call into question what the purpose of education is, whose needs it is supposed to serve and in what way these needs are supposed to be met (Apple, 2006). The 'neoliberalisation' of education policy has caused a significant shift in how policy is ideologically underpinned, fundamentally affecting values and operational practices within the sector, at the heart of which lies competition (Lazzarato, 2009). The logic of the free market leaves the environment ripe for individualism, as the spirit of competition relies on the creation of winners and losers (Leach, 2017). It is therefore the risk of losing that shapes institutional practice and thus the mechanisms employed to 'win'. Risk thrives in conditions of uncertainty, and it has become paramount for colleges to avoid such risks by employing whatever tactics they can to mitigate against them. There is evidence to suggest that such practices have led to a prevalence in 'game-playing', as institutions compete for the 'most valuable' students (Finlay & Finnie, 2002). In essence, the 'student' becomes a 'unit' which can be used to calculate levels of success or failure in an increasingly unstable market (Lucas & Crowther, 2016).

Competitive individualism has therefore shifted how relationships are forged within colleges. As Gleeson et al. (2015) reflect, "in a context in which courses were there to be delivered and students were viewed as a means of securing funding… marketization, managerialism and funding centred-ness have reduced caring in FE". Further, Finlay and Finnie (2002, p.154) demonstrate that at its worst, competition between further education providers has seen a more wide-spread use of coercive tactics to either attract or retain students: "comments about 'luring' or 'poaching' pupils or of schools 'hanging on' to them suggest perceptions of learners as, at worst, commodities that can be traded or captured". This would imply a disregard for student needs and further demonstrates a fundamental shift in values as a result of policies which force education providers to become more 'business-like'.

2.1 Performativity and practices of risk-aversion

The trend towards commodification in education and the resultant market value of

students, according to Bjursell (2016, p.292), represents a "demise of the nation state as a guarantor of social justice". The uncertainty that has been created by the neoliberal environment has resulted in risk being carried by individuals within institutions, and thus pressure to conform to centralised 'standards' to survive the ever-present threat of audit and inspection. O'Leary and Rami (2017) argue that colleges, as a result, have become ever-more heterogeneous over the last thirty years in a bid to satisfy the needs of government.

This so-called 'standards agenda' manifests itself through relentless audit practices, increased surveillance of teaching, monitoring of performance and uniformity of curriculum, accompanied by strict hierarchical management structures (Avis, 2003; Hill et al., 2015). This has led to teaching practices which are performance-based and target-driven rather than student-centred, a phenomenon commonly referred to in the literature as 'performativity' (Ball, 2005). Performativity therefore not only dictates what learning is valuable but also the kind of student that is valued. As Ball (2005 p.144) asserts, performative culture reflects the "quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. This issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial". Gleeson et al. (2015) are further keen to point out that the data drawn on by policy-makers (grade profiles and success rates) does not fully reflect what a provider does in producing inclusive, transformational learning environments. Conversely, failure to recognise the important work that colleges do in this regard could be undone as "basing funding on retention and achievement removes the very foundations of these relationships" (Illsley & Waller, 2017, p.479). The implication here is that if a student appears to be a 'risk', they are of no value to the institution. As such, there are certain kinds of student to be avoided for a college to stay financially healthy (ibid.). Atkins (2017) asserts that the policy environment has forced conceptualisations of young people into two broad categories: as 'problem' and as 'resource'. These conceptualisations allow further education institutions to identify the 'problem' students before they cause any financial damage to the institution.

2.2 'Becoming neoliberal': Impact upon professional identity

There have been several studies which have analysed the impact of the neoliberal, performative environment upon the professional identity of teachers in further and higher education (Avis, 1999; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013), which constitutes a move from 'professionalism' to 'managerialism' (Avis, 1999). The transition from being an autonomous professional to the subject of audit means that the pursuit of key performance indicators can potentially override matters of transformative teaching and learning. The prevalence of risk at all levels of the institution has cultivated environments where surveillance and evaluation are embedded into the everyday activities of actors within an institution. As Page (2017, p.3) notes, "we are all surveillance workers" now as the drive to produce favourable data has created a hyper-sensitivity towards identifying risk. Preoccupation with risk can lead practitioners to develop a deficit approach towards students, which can lead to pathologising them in various ways if they deviate from the expectation that the environment dictates (Atkins, 2016; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Illsley & Waller, 2017).

Notions of individualism and 'self-responsibility' do not appreciate the need for collectivism in meeting the social challenges in society. Within a competitive market, schools and colleges are single-handedly responsible for their own success or failure. Falling success rates are the responsibility of individual teachers, just as failure to succeed is the responsibility of the student (Finlay et al., 2007). Boocock (2015, p.728) contends that "funding and targets are two of the most powerful levers" used in government policy to meet retention and achievement targets on an institutional level, whilst keeping day-to-day governance at a distance. He argues that top-down policy reforms assume certain levels of 'self-interest' on the part of the individual, whether that be the institution, the manager or the lecturer.

It has been further argued by Coffield (2017, p.33) that "audit threatens to become a form of learned ignorance". When neoliberalism "becomes what educationalists do" (S. J. Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p.85) this necessitates a shift in value-orientation. This shift proposes that individuals are responsible for their own fate, and this notion is reinforced by practices of self-interest (Boocock, 2015). Atkins (2017, p.7) has argued that in this context, by "othering and homogenising certain (working-class) groups of young people… [they are held] personally responsible for their failure to participate in a neoliberal knowledge economy". By adopting the notion that the 'problem' student is in deficit, colleges can justify the exclusion of those who would negatively affect retention and achievement.

This form of aggressive individualism is reinforced through fear. Teaching has become a 'high stakes' activity (O'Leary, 2015) where those students with who are richer in ability, are more favourable (Hill et al., 2015). In effect, social and cultural value translates to economic value in this setting. Students of 'low value' pose a financial 'risk' as colleges are paid on the basis of student numbers (Illsley & Waller, 2017). This has led some institutions to adopt 'risk aversion' strategies as some students come to make good or bad 'business sense' (Finlay and Finnie, 2002; Boocock, 2015). The aim of this research study was to establish how risk was conceptualised by staff within FE institutions, and what the implications might be for those students who were identified as such.

3. Methodology

One of the central aims of the research was to understand perceptions of the term 'risk' and how this shaped the thinking and practice of staff in a General Further Education College (GFE). GFEs are predominantly large institutions with multiple campuses, offering generally vocational qualifications from Pathway (pre-Level 1) up to Level 4, with some also offering Higher Education provision. Therefore, FE encompasses not only a broad variety of education provision, but also a broad diversity of students. This makes conceptualisation of 'risk' particularly important in this setting, as many of the students have experienced previous educational failure.

The study therefore sought to establish how 'risk' was defined, what staff members considered the characteristics of an 'at risk' student to be and how these perceptions

influenced their thinking towards them. Therefore, the research was concerned with the *principles* that affected the use of the word, rather than the word itself (Moses & Knustson, 2007). The way an individual interprets a phenomenon can have significant consequences for the world around them (ibid.), and as such the aim was to understand the lived experience of the word, and the nuances of its everyday use.

3.1 Qualitative Interviews

A series of semi-structured, one-to-one qualitative interviews were conducted with a cross-section of staff and students across the institution. The interview schedule was designed to be as open as possible so as to allow as much freedom as possible for the participants to describe how they perceive the world around them (Cohen, Morrison, & Manion, 2003). The interviews sought to establish how these perceptions differed amongst staff in different positions, as well as whether there were any commonalities in the way 'at risk' students were identified within the institution.

The interviews were analysed manually using thematic analysis. Each participant was asked to define what the terms 'risk' and 'inclusion' meant to them, and so responses were categorised under the broad pre-defined codes of 'risk' and 'inclusion', while the sub-codes that followed emerged from the raw data in the transcripts. This approach ensured that the analysis was as true to the raw data as possible, which allowed themes to emerge directly from individual experience.

3.2. Participants and Research Setting

The context for the research was a large General Further Education College (GFE) in the North of England. A total of eight interviews were conducted with staff from various departments across the institution including two senior managers (Executive Director for Marketing and Student Services, Head of School for Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy), a middle manager (Student Services Manager), two support staff (Learning Support Practitioner and Mental Health Support Tutor) and three lecturers (from Art & Design, Catering & Hospitality and Computing & IT). Participants were approached from a diverse range of curriculum and support areas to establish a holistic view of how 'risk' was conceptualised and used in practice across the college. The name of the institution and the participants in the study were anonymised to protect their identity.

4. Findings: Understanding perceptions of the 'at risk' student

The findings of the study revealed that there was a broad acceptance by all participants that the definition of the term 'risk' in the context of the college was linked to the belief that a student was likely to withdraw from their course of study. However, this seemed to be closely linked to the participants' personal interaction with students: whether they were teaching, support or managerial staff. As such, the findings suggest that the term 'risk' was used in a standardised way, but the meaning was highly subjective. It was a term

generally linked to students who were 'disadvantaged' in some respect and was associated with personal characteristics or environmental factors that will affect their chances of success. The most common word used to describe an 'at risk' student was 'vulnerable'.

> *"... I would regard erm the definition of at risk at college as being with reference to particular learners or a learner who erm for a set of reasons or descriptives or what we know we would regard them as a college as being a learner who may be more likely to drop out… erm or a learner who's more vulnerable than another learner, a wobbler" [Director of Marketing & Student Services]*

Therefore, although risk was associated with non-completion, it was also linked to a series of behaviours which were used to calculate the level of risk the student presented. The analysis that follows describes definitions of risk under four key themes which emerged from the data: *'internal risk behaviours', 'external risk behaviours', 'profit and loss' and 'subversion'*.

4.1. Internal risk behaviours

Internal risk behaviours were those that could be linked to a student's performance on their course, such as poor attendance and low achievement. Therefore, in one respect, a learner was 'at risk' if they were 'not performing to the standard' [Lecturer 2, Computing & IT] that was required to complete a course. This could be because the student in question was missing work due to absence, or because they were failing to meet their targets.

The notion of 'not performing to the standard' was linked to a lack of motivation, poor behaviour and a failure to 'contribute' on the part of the student. Managers in the study stated that it was used frequently to describe a student who was going through the disciplinary process: one example provided by a senior manager linked the notion of risk to conduct, describing this kind of student as 'completely disaffected' [Director of Marketing & Student Services].

However, many of the participants drew an explicit distinction between what they described as the 'college' view of risk and their personal definitions of risk. Support staff were more likely to link risk to notions of safety and welfare, stating that their responsibilities to students identified as 'at risk' extended 'beyond the college' to encompass the experience of the learner in a more holistic capacity. Although they acknowledged that attendance and achievement was an indicator of risk, they were keen that the student should not feel judged because of these factors. As a result, they appeared to be more concerned with external risk indicators that may impact upon learning.

> *"[An 'at risk' student is] anybody who is at risk of not completing their educational studies within the college. I think that's the college perception. Erm, what my perception is, it's even more broad-ranging than that. We have students who we know are at risk of not participating in their studies fully or passing them successfully, erm, but then there are so many issues outside of the college that are impacting upon their*

lives, that we kind of have a conscious and moral responsibility to make sure those students are safe" [Learning Support Practitioner]

"what lecturers in the college would see as risk within the college is the very low attendance, unpredictable attendance, erratic, not doing the work, but then I see another picture... to me it's wider than this college" [Mental Health Support Tutor]

The above demonstrates how conceptualisations of risk were often context-dependent. Although there was a common understanding of risk as non-completion, the nature of the support staff role expanded this definition to include safeguarding and protection. Therefore, from an internal perspective, risk could constitute poor performance on a course, a potential 'drop-out' or a safeguarding concern. As such, the use of the term varied according to the kind of relationship the staff member had with students. For some, particularly the Executive Director for Marketing and Student Services, the term 'risk' could be used to describe all three sets of circumstances described above.

"I think that can vary depending on which, on the role we may play in college. At risk may be, for example, someone who hasn't gone through the full admissions process and has arrived very late in the process… erm, somebody, who erm, has had a lot of support at school… anger management, or has been in care... in terms of being at risk from a corporate point of view, from a college point of view it's about them being at risk of not attending and therefore not achieving. Dropping out, early drop out… I have two departments that I look after that at risk would be... well, mind you, three actually... so at risk I would say predominantly would be student services… but then 'at risk' is also from my point of view safeguarding and making sure that we keep all our learners safe so there are a number of different 'at risk'" [Director of Marketing and Student Services]

The complexity in this (abbreviated) statement by the Director for Marketing and Student Services echoes the complexity in identifying internal risk behaviours, though the notion of the standardised 'risk as non-completion' definition meant that it appeared to be used unproblematically, stating when asked: "I don't have a strong view on that. I think I understand what I mean by at risk". The subjective use of the term 'risk' as associated variously with non-completion, safety, behaviour and performance led to a blurring of definition which appeared to have the effect of linking any notion of vulnerability with risk.

4.2. External risk behaviours

External risk behaviours were linked to environmental factors that manifested themselves in terms of behaviour in college. All members of staff interviewed acknowledged that there were external influences that either reinforced, or were the cause of their 'risk' status. Just some of the external circumstances cited by participants included care leavers, learners from non-traditional families, learners with financial issues, domestic violence in the home, learners with criminal records, learners who were registered carers and teenage parents, but this is not an exhaustive list. There were also links to the personal characteristics of the

student such as learning difficulties, mental health issues and disabilities. If the learner had known involvement with external agencies, this also seemed to be an immediate indication of risk [Head of School, Hairdressing & Beauty Therapy].

These risk indicators manifested themselves variously in the forms of behaviours such as 'loneliness', 'disorganisation', 'forgetfulness', 'fearfulness', 'confusion', 'tearfulness', 'laziness', 'fatigue', 'de-motivation', 'disaffection', 'anger' and 'apathy'. The most common word used to describe this student of this kind was 'vulnerable'. However, some participants also seemed to suggest that students carried the burden of their vulnerability themselves, in the sense that they were somehow responsible for their circumstances and the consequences for their chance of achievement on their course. They 'made themselves' at risk, either due to external influences in their lives or because of their personal commitment to the course they were on.

> *"...a student could come to you and reveal things going on their life that put them at risk of withdrawing from education... **a student can put themselves at risk by what they reveal**, by what they do" [Student Services Manager]*

In this sense, being 'at risk' often meant that the issues experienced by these learners are not just 'beyond *their* control', but also 'beyond *our* (the college) control' [Student Services Manager]. As one lecturer put it, "...just using the term 'at risk' identifies, and labels, the student at risk even further I think" [Lecturer 1, Art & Design].

4.3. Risk calculation, profit and loss

Several participants were explicit about the institutional pressure to meet expected targets for retention and achievement, which meant in the teaching context, 'risk' was associated with financial loss. Therefore, to calculate risk, there needed to be a way of identifying it. As a result, vulnerability (or external risk indicators) became a way of diagnosing risk.

> *"Those were the kind of er, characteristics, that you had to instil (as a senior tutor) into tutors **so that we knew when somebody was not going to be funded** for some reason and where the figures for our particular sections were going to be at risk" [Lecturer 2, Computing & IT]*

In some cases, this was before they had even started college, as both senior managers in the study stated that risk can be picked up as early as enrolment through either disclosures on their application form such as declared convictions, mental health issues or learning difficulties or displaying 'anxious' behaviour. It seems that the pressure associated with retention and achievement caused staff to feel they had to be vigilant to what they perceived to be 'vulnerability'. For some, there was a self-conscious recognition of the dissonance they were experiencing in relation to this.

> *"In the first six weeks we're obviously looking at our students quite harshly I suppose… **we have no choice.** We're forced to do that." [Lecturer 3, Catering & Hospitality]*

The need to be able to identify at risk learners in the first six weeks of the academic term caused staff to work with risk on monetary terms. Within this context the risk is no longer

attributed to the student, but becomes a tool to identify where money may be lost. One participant linked this to changes in funding policy:

> *"I really think it's come about with changes to funding and stuff like that… **where the student's seen as a pound**... so they're at risk of going, we're at risk of losing money" [Student Services Manager]*

The pressures associated with this view of risk made the definition and use of the term sometimes problematic:

> *I think **there's a lot of pressure from subject areas**, curriculum areas, almost seen as black and white, it's sort of figures… they've got targets to meet erm, so there's that difficulty [Mental Health Support Tutor]*

4.4 Risk and subversion

That being, some staff felt that there was leverage in the use of the term risk as a strategic tool to get help needed for the student by using the term to appeal to the self-interest of staff.

> *"I find it helpful because if you say it to other people they tend to take notice of it... **if you said it to a manager, their first thought would be 'my stats'**" [Student Services Manager]*
>
> *"I do think there needs to be a general term to use... highlighting, flagging up... that's the danger, that people can fall off the radar and not be picked up" [Learning Support Practitioner]*

In this sense, the term was necessary to ensure students were retained. The two members of staff above felt that the college was already losing many students who were never identified. Particularly for support staff in the study, students 'at risk' were addressing 'major, major difficulties in their life' [Learning Support Practitioner]. However, in the context of economic risk, there was a general sense in the data that welfare was often subsidiary to targets. Support staff, however, were more likely to use the term only with learners in the context of support and safety.

5. Discussion

It has become evident through the process of analysing the interview discourse that 'risk' is a term with multiple definitions. The analysis found four key ways of accounting for risk within the institution: *'internal risk behaviours', 'external risk behaviours', 'profit and loss' and 'subversion'.* The tensions that existed between the uses of 'risk' in this context were made explicit in the dissonance experienced by the managers and lecturers who at once had a duty to support learners displaying either internal or external 'risk behaviours', and also protect the interests of their course through the monitoring of profit and loss. This tension appeared to complicate their view of students who fell into the 'risk' category meaning that the identification of a 'risk' behaviour became steeped in subjective experience. The conflict

in the narratives of the lecturers, in particular, was reflected in their self-conscious understanding of the 'profit and loss' conceptualisation of risk. This links with Illsley and Waller's (2017, p.484) study of further education lecturers, where they found "a clear consensus from the participants that the pressure to secure funding is affecting working practices", something which is echoed strongly by Lecturer 3 who states that teaching staff are 'forced' to view students harshly. It appeared to be this pressure that sensitised lecturers to risk indicators such as poor performance or low attendance, making the student vulnerable to withdrawal, particularly in the first six weeks "whereby all students who are no longer likely to achieve must be withdrawn if serious financial consequences were to be avoided" (Illsley & Waller, 2017: 480). It is possible that this conflict arises when the individual's 'personal' definition of risk (predominantly associated with '*external risk behaviours'*) collides with the so-called 'college' definition of risk *('internal risk behaviours'* and *'profit and loss'*).

5.1 Vulnerability as a determinant of risk

The tension between 'risk as vulnerability' and 'risk as profit and loss' seemed to lead staff to identify students who were perceived to be 'at risk' using a pool of specific characteristics relating to their disadvantage, either due to personal or environmental factors. External risk behaviours led to stereotypical views of students sharing similar characteristics or experiencing similar problems. Therefore, the duty to identify risk leads to the 'othering' of students who were considered 'vulnerable'. (Johnson, 2005, p.525) discusses the power and influence of stereotyping in observing that "stereotypes reflect an illusionary correlation between two unrelated factors, such as being poor and lazy. Negative traits are easy to acquire and hard to lose... we tend to see our own behaviour and judgements as common and appropriate, and to view alternative behaviour as uncommon an inappropriate". Johnson goes on to explain that this kind of thinking can lead to 'blaming the victim', which happens when people try to attach meanings or causes to events (ibid.). In the case of 'risk' and student drop-out in further education, staff try to seek explanations external to their locus of control. If the 'risk' is outside of their control, attrition can be justified.

The performative nature of the further education system undermines the importance of relationships as transformative, by placing conditions of success or failure onto the teacher-student relationship. The notion 'self-responsibility' linked to the perceptions of risk in this study fuels the individualistic notion that people are to blame for their own circumstances (Atkins, 2017). As a result, there was also a sense in the data that the status of 'risk' was transient in nature; that a student could fall (or opt) in or out of the category if they did something to change their behaviour (in relation to attendance or achievement). However, the cause of the risk was often attributed to a fixed part of that student's identity: for example, their socio-economic background or whether they were a care-leaver. (Atkins & Flint, 2015, p.25) observe that "hegemonic and normative discourses in which young people are variously positioned in discursive practices over which they have no control". In this case, the discourse of vulnerability has the effect of positioning young people in terms of 'risk', which can then follow them throughout their learning journey.

According to Stephen Ball (2005), neoliberal auditing is not a process of 'de-regulation' but 're-regulation'. In other words, a shift in focus from values to *value*. He asserts that "the primacy of caring relations in work with pupils and colleagues has no place in the hard world of performativity" (Ball, 2005, p.180). In this context, the relationship between the institution and the student is fundamentally changed. This potentially weakens the ties that students have with their educators, which could reduce trust for those who do not have the social or cultural resources they need to navigate this system, and may be more likely to fail to achieve.

5.2 Subversion for social justice?

It is important to note at this stage that the participants in this study were not blind to their obligation to support the vulnerable students under their care. The external risk behaviours described above were taken seriously by all of the participants, who felt that risk also served as a way to highlight when urgent action was needed to support learners, with the aim of securing their long-term retention and achievement. This was particularly true of the Mental Health Support Tutor and the Learning Support Practitioner, who it could be argued had the luxury of being able to construct relationships with students outside of the performative environment. In some ways, the self-conscious recognition of the tensions between 'risk as vulnerability' and 'risk as profit and loss' can mediate the potentially damaging effects of 'being vulnerable' in this context. This is evident through the subversive narratives demonstrated above by the Learning Support Practitioner and the Student Services Manager. In this sense, notions of profit and loss can be used to motivate staff members to do more to support and retain students who are vulnerable. However, this leverage is also restricted by performative notions of 'profit and loss', as it manipulated behaviour towards the self-interested preoccupation with retention and achievement. Further, it is also important to point out that this influence was only effective after the 'census' window (Illsley & Waller, 2017), at which student numbers were centrally audited. As such, the extent to which the social justice concerns of staff could be successfully addressed was shaped by the rigidity of the performative environment.

5.3 Limitations

Given the small scale of this research study, the findings presented here do not seek to generalise the use of the term risk to all further education settings, though given the increasing homogeneity of the environment (O'Leary & Rami, 2017), there are important themes which may be identifiable in similar institutions. Further, the rapid pace and change of Further Education policy likely changes the nature of the 'risk' presented and therefore, how risk is mitigated within institutions. However, the mindful consideration of how various risks may influence student achievement and widening participation is crucial, which is why further study of this phenomenon is advocated.

6. Conclusion

The research presented here has demonstrated that risk, and its association with students, is problematic given the tensions in the accounts of the term described in this paper. The notion of risk as both an economic and social phenomenon raises significant ethical issues with regards to the inclusion of students in further education. The drive to identify areas of potential profit and loss leads to negative conceptualisations of students who may represent a 'risk' to the financial health of the organisation. Conflicting accounts of risk make explicit the difficulties presented to staff who work with so-called 'vulnerable' students. Whilst recognising the wider contextual issues of their lives, staff are also duty-bound to safeguard the college's interests. Whilst awareness of this conflict can, in some cases, lead to subversive practices to support student retention, the notion of vulnerability as undesirable within a performative environment remains in need of continuous challenge.

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